

# SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

## BIGGER DOES NOT MEAN BETTER

Mark 4:26-34

Does anyone know what the H1N1 virus is? Well, from a scientific perspective it is a new strain of the Influenza A virus subtype that contains genes closely related to an influenza virus endemic to pigs. For most of us, the H1N1 virus is the agent that causes "Swine Flu" and was the center of the prediction of a dangerous epidemic. Since the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918 was caused by a variant of the same strain, parallels were drawn. The records show that the epidemic started with a spring prelude, was followed by a respite, and then the full-blown epidemic later in the year, during the usual flu season. So, have we heard the last of the H1N1 virus? Probably not, as CDC and the *Washington Post* maintain their vigilant search for evidence of its return in earnest. As a matter of fact, just this Thursday the World Health Organization declared the Swine Flu outbreak as a pandemic with 27,000 reported infections in 74 countries.

As virulent as the H1N1 virus appears to be, one might well argue that there are more dangerous epidemics lurking in our culture that go unrecognized. These infections are ultimately more deadly, and although far less dramatic, they contaminate our lives and bring dis-ease. At the top of this list in our country, regardless of the season, is the epidemic caused by the BIG virus, that is the Big, Immense, Gigantic virus, which is a strain of materialism.

We live in a culture where there is no category that has not been infected by the BIG virus. Other than the occasional Habitat for Humanity house, new home construction appears to be focused on mini-mansions with 3-car garages. Having one child "forces" a couple to buy a vehicle that Dave Berry termed, a Chevy Subdivision. A keep-up-with-the-culture wedding will easily run the father of the bride \$50,000. Resumes have morphed from helpful summaries for evaluating an applicant into Tolstoy-like tomes including complicated relational networks, serendipitous encounters with various disciplines and not a little creative writing. And inflation has hit everything from TV channel-listings, to social networks, computer memory, and retirement plans. Such a brief summary makes it clear that we are all infected by the BIG virus.

Before we critique the culture too harshly, let me remind us that the church has not demonstrated immunity to such infection. No matter how we try to disguise it, the success of a church is measured in terms of size, with big always meaning better. Whether we measure church membership or church attendance, the number people counted is seen as directly correlated to the "health" of the church. The churches we esteem most are those with the large buildings, expansive facilities, multiple clergy staff and 7+ figure budgets. The number and size of programs offered by the church are tangible parameters of health and success. Even in the area of evangelism we maintain a "Golden Arches" mentality. Remember the old McDonald's signs announcing, "Over 1 billion burgers sold"? There is a sad quip among clergy which makes the observation that

clergy seldom discern a call to a smaller parish and less salary. Yes, the BIG virus is alive and active even in the Church.

How different this all is from Jesus' description of the Kingdom of God. He said,

*“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth”* (Mark 4:30-31).

This side of the Second Coming we need to think small when we are thinking about the Kingdom of Heaven. That is certainly the witness of the Bible. Human participation in God's kingdom began with one man, Adam. After the Flood, God restarted man's participation with one family, Noah's. When it was time to raise up a people as a witness to the kingdom, God called one man, Abraham. God's nation, Israel descended from one man, Jacob. After the exile, God called back only a small remnant. God's most graphic revelation of himself and his direction and purpose on earth was through the one God-man, Jesus. The ministry of the earthly Jesus was focused not only in one small province, but on 12 men. The seed of the kingdom is small indeed.

It was Satan in the wilderness that promised “big;” a lot of bread, a lot of ministering angels and a lot of kingdoms (Matthew 4:3-9). All God promised Jesus was his love and endorsement (Matthew 3:17). Likewise, when Jesus calls disciples, he simply says, *“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people”* (Matthew 4:19).

The Kingdom of God is based not on “big” but on “little.” Jesus did not approach the would-be disciples with a large program, legions of supporting angels, grandiose promises or better-life scenarios. Jesus offered the disciples a relationship. He did not design and execute a mass media campaign or evangelistic program. Jesus invested in a less-than-impressive assortment of a dozen fishermen, tax collectors and zealots. By doing so, Jesus was teaching us how to fish. True growth in the Kingdom of God happens one person at a time.

The ultimate ministry of the Church is to expand God's order, his kingdom, over the chaos of this godless world. This ministry is not to be left to the professionals or to specialty programs employed by the church community, but is the ministry of every individual in every church. In the Catechism found in the *Book of Common Prayer*, we are taught the following about the ministry of the Church.

*Q. How does the Church pursue its mission?*

*A. The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love.*

*Q. Through whom does the Church carry out its mission?*

*A. The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members.*

*Q. Who are the ministers of the Church?*

*A. The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons.*

*Q. What is the ministry of the laity?*

*A. The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church. (BCP, p.855)*

The success of the ministry of the Church is not to be found in big programs, staffs, budgets, buildings, revivals or anything else we can imagine or develop. The God-ordained ministry of the Church is based on the obedient life of every single individual member of the Church.

If you feel small and insignificant in the face of the challenge – you are qualified. If you feel inadequate – you are qualified. If you know only one other person – you are qualified. If you can pray for someone else – you are qualified. If you are willing to love Jesus – you are qualified. In summary, God has a simple 3-step plan for the growth of the Kingdom:

1. Make a friend;
2. Be a friend; and
3. Bring a friend to Christ.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, as you entered this world as a small and solitary baby in the little town of Bethlehem, help us not to be infected by the big and glitzy methods of this world. Guide us through your Spirit to share our lives and the Good News that has been shared with us with the individual people you have placed in our lives. May we invest ourselves in others for their sake and for the growth of your kingdom. Amen.

*Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on the Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 14, 2009.*